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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a preferred design of organizational effectiveness studies of small rural school districts. The preferred design consists of five major and mostly sequential steps: (1) considering a large number of complex policy questions associated with the issue of organizational effectiveness efforts; (2) deciding on the technical issue of how best to think about subsystems of a rural district for which measures of quality are to be developed; (3) deciding what is to constitute measures of quality of each of the subsystems; (4) reaching agreement on the translation of the measures of quality into operational standards that will reflect the contextual reality of each district; and (5) establishing the presence or absence of a standard. For each of these steps options to be considered are listed. The preferred design is influenced by the belief that one universal model for assessing organizational effectiveness of rural school districts cannot exist at present. The paper finds it is more useful to develop frameworks for assessing effectiveness than to develop a theory of effectiveness that applies to rural school systems. (CS)

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Results of First Stage Field Testing of a
Preferred Design for Organizational
Effectiveness Studies of Rural, Small Schools

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INTRODUCTION

- In recent years policymakers as well as researchers and practitioners have devoted considerable attention to the topic of the organizational effectiveness of public sector institutions.
- The popularity of the topic in the policy community can be traced to the growing concerns about the quality of public services, their cost, and the need for increased accountability.
- The increased interest in the topic in the research and practice communities can be linked in part to the growing awareness that it is useful to think about organizational effectiveness as the very center of conceptualizations of the nature of organizations, and that it is the ultimate dependent variable in research on organizations (Cameron & Whetten, 1983; Madaus, et al. 1980).
- Evidence of the growing awareness of the importance of the topic can be found in a recent estimate that there have been several hundred articles and book chapters and approximately twenty major books published on the subject in the past two decades alone. The number of case studies with an organizational effectiveness focus completed in recent years would increase these estimates fifty-fold.
- Public education has not escaped the new wave of interest in the topic; indeed, it could be argued that the current examination of the effectiveness of education is more intense than that of other public sector institutions, in both absolute terms and in a relative sense.
- The organizational effectiveness of rural small school districts in particular is bearing the brunt of much of the renewed interest. Despite the popularity of the topic, most observers would agree that we are still without a meaningful definition of organizational effectiveness, and, it follows, have not yet produced a widely supported theory of effectiveness. Nor is there presently a universally accepted methodology for the assessment of organizational effectiveness. In fact, the construct is still surrounded by a great deal of controversy and heated debate. Organization theorists have advocated a perplexing number of conceptual schemes, analytical points of departure, and models for the study of effectiveness. Moreover, a multitude of criteria for judging effectiveness have been advanced, each with its own advocates and opponents (Cameron & Whetten, 1983).
- The paper summarizes the authors' preferred design of organizational effectiveness studies of rural small school districts and reports on the results of assessments of the design that were completed as part of first stage pilot testing of the design.

THE PREFERRED DESIGN

- Two basic assumptions influenced the development of the authors' design approach: first, there cannot be at this time (if ever) one universal model for assessing the organizational effectiveness of a rural school district (because as Cameron and Whetten (1983) remind us: existing paradigms are products of multiple, arbitrary models of organizations; the construct space of organizational effectiveness is unknown; and, the best criteria for assessing effectiveness are unknown); and, secondly, it would be more useful at this time to develop frameworks for assessing effectiveness than it would be to try to develop a theory of effectiveness of a rural school system.
- Our approach consists of five major and mostly sequential steps:
 - Step One: consideration of a large number of complex policy questions associated with the issue of organizational effectiveness efforts,
 - Step Two: deciding on the important, but largely straightforward technical issue of how best to think about the various subsystems of a rural district for which measures of quality are to be developed,
 - Step Three: developing a consensus concerning what is to constitute measures of quality for each of the subsystems,
 - Step Four: reaching agreement on the translation of the measures of quality into operational standards for each of the subsystems that reflect the contextual realities of the districts, and
 - Step Five: establishing the presence or absence of a standard.
- As suggested above, reaching agreement on the technical questions of how best to think about the subsystems of a rural small school district that is to be the focus of the organizational effectiveness effort (Step Two) should not prove to be difficult. Considerable debate, however, is likely to surround the other four steps in the approach proposed here.

Step One: Consideration of Major Policy Issues

- A large number of policy issues surround organizational effectiveness inquiries. Twelve issues that we regard to be particularly central are cited below. Also cited are a number of options that were considered for each and our preferred option(s). Note that a number of these policy issues will ultimately take on the cast of technical issues as implementation strategies are ultimately considered in Steps Three and Four.

- These policy issues are, of course, interrelated. However, no option choice is inherently right or wrong although a choice of a policy option for a particular issue must, of course, be internally consistent with choices made for other related issues.
 - The ideas expressed in the policy issues were greatly influenced by Cameron and Whetten (1983), Brownas (1974), Hatry (1974), and Balk (1975), whose work we found particularly useful in shaping our perspective on the most appropriate design to use in measuring the organizational effectiveness of public service organizations.
1. What is to be the theoretical approach used in the assessment?
Options include:
 - . a goal model approach
 - . a systems model approach
 - an integrated model approach
 2. What is to be the purpose of the assessment? Options include:
 - . summative evaluation
 - formative evaluation
 - . a combination of the above
 3. From what perspective is organizational effectiveness to be judged?
Options include:
 - . rural school board
 - . rural school board organizational members
 - . state education agency
 - . the public
 - a combination or all of the above
 4. On what domain of rural school activity is the assessment to be made? Options include:
 - . constituencies served
 - . technologies employed
 - . services provided
 - a combination or all of the above
 5. What organizational level of analysis is to be employed in the assessment? Options include:
 - . individual level
 - . subunit level
 - . organizational level
 - a combination or all of the above

6. What time frame(s) is/are to be used in the assessment? Options include:
 - . short-term (every two years)
 - . intermediate-term (three to five years)
 - . long-term (five to ten years)
 - a combination or all of the above

7. What is the referent or standard against which organizational effectiveness is to be judged? Options include:
 - . the use of absolutes
 - . development of engineering standards
 - comparison with other times and other places
 - . comparison with the private sector
 - use of analysis to establish desired targets
 - targets established by judgment
 - . a combination or all of the above

8. Who is to be responsible for developing standards? Options include:
 - . the rural school board
 - . constituent groups
 - . state legislature or judicial branch
 - the state education agency
 - . professional associations
 - dominant coalition
 - . a combination or all of the above

9. What type of data are to be used in the assessment? Options include:
 - . quantitative data
 - . qualitative data
 - . perceptions of key internal actors
 - . perceptions of key external actors
 - a combination or all of the above

10. What criteria are to be used in the selection of effectiveness measures and in data collection procedures? Options include:
 - . appropriateness and validity
 - . uniqueness
 - . completeness
 - . controllability
 - . cost
 - . timeliness of feedback
 - . accuracy and reliability
 - a combination or all of the above

11. Whose responsibility is it to measure the organizational effectiveness of a rural small school district? Options include:
- rural school board
 - constituent groups
 - the public
 - state education agency
 - a combination or all of the above
12. What uses are to be made of the results of an assessment? Options include:
- rural school system internal use
 - constituency use
 - state education agency use

Step Two: Reaching Agreement on How Best to Think About
the Various Subsystems of a Rural School System

- Prior to reaching agreement on the measures of quality by which to judge the organizational effectiveness of a rural system (Step Three), one must have available some way to view the various parts and functions of the organizations that are to be the subject of the measurement. There are, of course, any number of useful ways available to do this.
- Our preference is that it is useful to think about a rural small school district as having a number of basic, near universal organizational-structural characteristics such as:
 - a governance subsystem,
 - a management subsystem,
 - an instructional program subsystem,
 - an instructional support subsystem,
 - a client subsystem,
 - a staffing subsystem,
 - a financial subsystem, and
 - a facilities and equipment subsystem.

Step Three: Reaching Agreement on What
Constitutes Measure of Quality

- This step is, of course, one of the most difficult and complex tasks confronting the policy and professional communities, largely because the measurement of the quality (no sharp distinction between effectiveness and quality is being made here, even though the two terms could have different meanings depending upon their use in various contexts) of a rural school district is dependent on the theoretical approach being used, the purpose of the assessment, from what perspective effectiveness is being judged, and other important policy choices and other value judgments that must be made.
- Our preference for the measures of quality for each of the eight previously cited organizational-structural subsystems of a rural small school district is that quality be viewed from the lens of six different criteria. The preferred criteria and the way we operationally define each are cited below.
 - effectiveness: does the activity result in the achievement of a valued outcome?
 - efficiency: does the activity achieve the greatest effectiveness at least cost?
 - adequacy: does the activity, given the level of effectiveness, satisfy the needs, values, or opportunities that gave use to a problem?
 - equity: does the activity result in effects or efforts that are fairly or justly distributed?
 - responsiveness: does the activity satisfy the needs, preferences, or values of the intended group?
 - appropriateness: are the objectives and underlying assumptions of the above measures tenable for this school district?
- While we find substantial consensus in the literature concerning our operational definitives of the preferred criteria we use, we are equally indebted to the work of William N. Dunn (1981).

Step Four: Reaching Agreement on the Translation of the
Measures of Quality Into Operational Standards for Each
of the Subsystems the Contextual Realities of the Districts

- Our preference for the translation of one of the measures of quality--responsiveness--into operational standards is as follows:
 - governance subsystem: opportunities exist for involving the public in decisionmaking so that their interests are satisfied.

- management subsystem: opportunities exist for participatory decisionmaking at all levels of the organization.
- instructional program subsystem: opportunities for addressing the educational needs of all handicapped children are provided.
- instructional support subsystem: use is made of volunteers and other community resources to enrich the instruction program.
- client subsystem: use is made of MIS technologies to secure the views of the various constituencies that make up the client subsystem.
- staffing subsystem: professional development opportunities exist that address the needs of the individual school and the school district.
- financial subsystem: decisions concerning resource allocations are consistent with the educational priorities of the individual school and the district.
- facilities and equipment subsystem: opportunities exist for the appropriate use of facilities by community groups.

Step Five: Establishing the Presence or Absence of a Standard

- This culminating step in our design approach is straightforward; however, it should be recalled that we argued earlier that responsibility for the assessment should rest with the individual district working in collaboration with the state education agency (policy issue #11).

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